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OVERVIEW LATIN AMERICA

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A CHRISTIAN STANCE TOWARD THE INSURRECTION OF THE
SALVADOREAN PEOPLE

--San Salvador
January 1, 1981

CHRISTIANS IN THE FACE OF THE INSURRECTION OF THE SALVADOREAN PEOPLE

The people of El Salvador are living in a critical and decisive hour in their history. They are deciding their future and destiny as a people. They have decided to liberate themselves from oppression, to regain their dignity and to organize a society that will be fraternal (sic) and just for the poor majorities. In these moments, the Salvadorean people are preparing themselves for an insurrection as a last resort to obtain that justice and peace which they have sought for so long and for just as long have been denied.

We, as Christians, men and women religious, clergy, who have worked in diverse areas of pastoral ministry, education, social development, and humanitarian aid -- we also want to accompany the people in these moments, to recognize the justice of their cause and of their struggle, and to recognize the legitimate right that they have in their insurrection.

For years we have been close to the suffering people, to the poor and oppressed; we have experienced their misery, as well as their hope and their decision for an authentic liberation. We have tried to serve them according to the gospel, but they have also shown us the basic truths of the gospel, the love of God as good news of the kingdom for the poor. In this hour of insurrection, filled with suffering and hope, we wish to be with the poor, we want to explain our choice, and we want to see in the insurrection of the people the signs of the times, the word of God directed to us as Christians.

1. For fifty years, the Salvadorean people have lived under oppressive and unjust economic, social and political structures that in no way have promoted the common good of the poor majorities, but rather have promoted the privileges of and domination by the few. In every aspect of life, health, food, housing, employment, education, etc., there is the frightful reality spoken of in the document of Puebla: "The distance between the many who have little and the few who have so much."

Human rights have been systematically violated under military regimes of national security. They have violated freedom of expression, the right to vote, and constitutional guarantees. The legislative system and the administration of justice have been corrupted. Successive regimes have repressed the people, have used illegal arrests and torture, and have assassinated and kidnapped many of the poor of El Salvador as well as many of those who have acted in solidarity with them.

This long course of oppression and repression has changed in no way; rather it has gotten worse up to the point of genocide with the present government, which rose out of a pact between the military and the Christian Democratic Party. Regardless of the repeated words of democracy and the false promises of reform, the year 1980 has seen the increase of misery and unemployment, and above all an increase in the barbarous repression of the people. More than 10,000 Salvadoreans have been assassinated by the national guard, the army, and paramilitary groups. Peasants, workers, union members, students, professors, doctors, and slum dwellers have been murdered in frightful numbers and with a cruelty unparalleled in the history of the country. El Salvador has turned, as Archbishop Romero used to say, into the empire of hell.

This year the Church, too, has been persecuted as never before. The assassination of Archbishop Romero was the most significant, the most repugnant and provocative crime, a measure of the cruelty of the current system. And with him four priests have been assassinated this year, which brings to eleven the number of martyrs among the clergy of El Salvador. Also assassinated were three North American Religious and a social worker, numerous catechists and a great number of Christian faithful. In addition, church property has been invaded, machine-gunned, and dynamited: the Legal Aid office, places for refugees, the radio station, the Catholic press and library, Christian educational institutions, the residences of priests and Religious, and even the churches.

If we want to bring in the human aspect to this brief summary, we have to recall the faces of the mothers and wives who go from jail to jail looking for sons and husbands who have disappeared and whose final hope is at least to find their bodies in some clandestine cemetery. We have to recall the bodies disposed of in garbage trucks, the decapitated bodies, the limbs amputated and cast aside. We have to recall the peasants who for months sleep out in the brush for fear that the security forces will come; the peasants who have fled in fear from their villages, pursued and machine-gunned by helicopters. We have to recall the peasants who at the Sumpul River had to choose between being shot by the national guard, or drowning in the river, or living in dire poverty if they succeed in crossing the frontier alive. We have to recall the bodies of the little children thrown into the air as target practice for the national guard, their little bodies found in the nets of the fishermen on the Sumpul River.

This is the true situation of our country. It is the result of the politics of the present regime. Archbishop Romero denounced its intentions of making reforms with repression. As the year progressed, we saw no effective reform, but only the horror of the repression. And even though the government has tried to dismiss its responsibility for the repression, presenting it as if it were the result of confrontations between extremists on different sides, both Archbishop Romero as well as Bishop Rivera have denounced those truly responsible: the national guard, certain sections of the army, groups of paramilitary on the right, and in the final analysis, the junta of the government.

This government, consequently, is not legitimate. It neither seeks nor is able to secure the common good, rather it is drowning the country in blood. It has the backing only of the oligarchy, the national guard, some military and the government of the United States. The Salvadorean people repudiate it and have come together in democratic, popular and revolutionary organizations to put an end to the barbarity and to secure justice and a lasting peace.

2. The Salvadorean people have not chosen the armed conflict, rather it has been forced upon them. Over the years they have sought peaceful solutions through elections and they have used political and social pressure to attain their aspirations. But all to no avail. Elections have been systematically fraudulent and political organizations and parties have been systematically harassed and threatened with annihilation.

The coup of October 15 (1979), which could have been the last peaceful effort toward a solution, promptly proved to be ineffective. All the civilians and some honest military persons have gradually abandoned the successive juntas and their governments. They have all given the same reasons: the impossibility of carrying out a genuine policy in favor of the people and the impossibility of stopping the repression, definitely promoted by those entrenched in the armed forces, the government, and the junta.

If the common good does not exist in El Salvador, if peaceful means have been continually blocked, then we are in that situation in which the Church admits the right of legitimate insurrection, "in the case of clear and prolonged tyranny which gravely menaces the fundamental rights of the person and injures the common good of the country." (Paul VI, Populorum Progressio, n. 31; Medellin, Peace, n. 19).

As Salvadoreans and as Christians, we are conscious of the tragedy of war, of the material and human costs that go with it. We are conscious of the fruitfulness of peace and we have worked for it. But we repeat with Archbishop Romero that if peace is not possible, we have "the case for insurrection that the Church admits when all recourses to peaceful means have been exhausted." (Interview with El Diario de Caracas, March 19, 1980).

The Salvadorean people have, besides, the right not only to internal freedom but to external independence. It has the right to decide its own destiny, without foreign powers intervening to defend what they call their vital interests. For this reason, we repeat what Bishop Rivera recently affirmed and what Archbishop Romero clearly expressed in a letter to President Carter: The government of the United States has no right to interfere in the destiny of El Salvador to determine its future and much less to support militarily the current government. "It would be unjust and deplorable if, because of the interference of foreign powers, the Salvadorean people were to be frustrated, were to be repressed and prevented from deciding autonomously the economic and political course which our nation must follow. It would suppose the violation of a right which we Latin American Bishops, gathered in Puebla, publicly acknowledged when we cited 'the legitimate self-determination of our peoples which will allow them to organize themselves according to their proper genius and the march of their history'" (Puebla, 505) (Letter to President Carter, February 17, 1980)

For this reason, we unite ourselves with so many voices throughout the world, and especially with the declarations of the bishops, priests, religious and faithful of the United States, exhorting their government not to interfere in El Salvador.

3. A popular insurrection for the liberation of a people is not only an historical, legitimate reality, but, for Christians, it is also a sign of the times through which God speaks to and calls us. The first thing that a just insurrection tells us is that God's patience has run out. It is a repetition of Israel's experience in Egypt: "I have seen the oppression of my people, I have heard their complaints against their oppressors, I have looked at their sufferings. I have come down to free them " (Ex. 3:7-8). The God of life, of justice and of liberation is once again present in the rebellion of the people against the sin of the society. God is present defending the poor against their oppressors.

In this situation, an insurrection speaks to us of Christian resurrection. A people oppressed in time, crucified like Christ, like the servant of Yahweh, pours out its blood once again for the life of the mass of poor people. And like the cross of Christ, it is fruitful and salvific. Even in its tragic form, it reproduces a new passover of death and life, of sorrow and hope.

There is sorrow because of the cost in human lives, in the disruption of social life, and in the destruction of material goods. We pray, therefore, as Christians, that the conflict of the insurrection be as humanitarian as possible and that it not degenerate into a dynamic of destruction. We plead, along with Bishop Rivera, that it not become dehumanized, that all respect the rules of war, the rights of the civilian population and of the combatants, the immunity of churches, hospitals and places of refuge, and that even in the midst of armed conflict, no one commit acts of terrorism and assassination out of vengeance. We ask that those who fight for a just cause fight with nobility and those who defend an unpopular cause stop shooting their own brothers and sisters.

In an insurrection, there is above all hope. Christian hope clearly does not reside in arms, even though these may be necessary and legitimate. Christian hope is in the just cause of a people, in the generosity of their gift of self, in the nobility of their struggle. Hope is present when the heroism and valor characteristic of the armed struggle are afterwards transformed into generosity and commitment to the reconstruction of the country as expressed by Isaiah: that swords be turned into plowshares, that the wolf and the lamb shall graze together, that the poor shall live in the houses they build and eat the fruit of the fields they till (Is. 2:4; 65:21-25). Christian hope, finally, resides in there issuing from the uprising the real resurrection of the poor of El Salvador.

As Christians, we beg of God that from so much bloodshed life should blossom, that so much generous sacrifice of life convert us to the only God, who is love and commitment to the poor, and to the son Jesus Christ who came to bring us life and life in abundance. We beg God to keep us strong, united to the people in these moments of suffering and that we work joyfully in the work of reconstruction.

With faith in God and in the blood shed by so many Salvadorean martyrs, we wish to end with the words of the prophet Archbishop Romero that we not falter: "The cry of liberation of this people is a cry that reaches to God and nothing and no one can stop it." Over these ruins the glory of the Lord will shine.

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Caritas, Archdiocese of San Salvador
Comite of the Animators of Pastoral Health (CAPS)
Conference of Men and Women Religious of El Salvador (CONFRES)
Federation of Centers of Catholic Education
Archdiocesan Pastoral Council
National Commission of Justice and Peace
Faith and Joy
Christian Life Communities
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Baptist Assembly
Christian Student Movement (MEC)